Panel Discussion: E-Government and Citizen-Centered Government Round Table

Citizen Expectations – Danielle Germain   (www.excelgov.org)
Ms. Germain first explained that the Council for Excellence in government is a non-profit, non-partisan organization whose purpose is to improve government at all levels and improve the place of government in the esteem of citizens. Their priorities include:
a.   Attracting and developing talented people for government
b.   Encouraging innovation and results-oriented performance
c.   Improving connection between citizens and government
d.   Using e-Go as a tool for improving government --annual poll on e-government

The major programs are the leadership and fellowship program for government employees, the awards program to recognize excellence in government, outreach to youth to encourage government service, and others like how journalists can cover government more responsibly and how the entertainment industry treats government.

She then discussed The Council for Excellence in Government's e-government poll data from 2000 and 2002, focusing on citizen and government expectations about e-gov. Hart-Teeter conducted two surveys in November 2001, for the Council for Excellence in Government. The surveys were conducted by telephone, one among 961 adults nationwide, including a sample of 155 Internet users, the other among 400 government decision makers, including 200 decision makers at the federal level, 100 in state government, and 100 in local governments at the city or county level. Hart-Teeter concluded the study by convening a focus group in Towson, Maryland, a suburb of Baltimore, with male and female Internet users of different ages and ethnic backgrounds. The focus group was used to explore the survey findings and gaining additional insights into people's use and perception of e-government.

One year ago e-government was a "revolution" in the making, but now the revolution appears to be going mainstream. E-government is expanding rapidly, particularly at the state and local levels of government. Over the past year alone, nearly one in ten Americans visited a state, county, or city government web site for the first time. E-government has become an important part of how many Americans interact with government – most Internet users (76%) and over half (51%) of all Americans have now visited a government web site. Americans are more positive about the idea of e-government, they have higher expectations for what e-government can accomplish, and they are increasingly willing to invest their tax dollars in e-government.

Since September 11, the public sees additional reasons for investing in e-government. The threat of further terrorism has put domestic preparedness at the forefront of Americans' consciousness and the public believes that e-government has a critical role to play. By improving communication and coordination between government agencies and federal, state, and local government, the public believes that e-government can enhance the government's ability to apprehend terrorists and respond to public health threats.   This is not to say that the public is unconcerned or unquestioning about e-government. Americans continue to worry about the security of government Web sites, particularly the specter of government-stored personal information and ultimately their identity being stolen. They are less confident about making on-line monetary transactions with the government than they are with commercial entities. Many e-government users remain frustrated with the government's ability to deliver services that e-government is intended to improve. Report findings follow:

1. 70% believe e-government will improve the ability of agencies such as the FBI, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and local police departments to coordinate a response to a public emergency. Ninety percent say that they feel very or fairly favorable toward e-government systems that would help federal, state, and local law enforcement exchange information to help in apprehending and prosecuting criminals and terrorists. The public also is confident that e-government will greatly improve the government's ability to coordinate a response to a public health threat or bioterrorism attack (77%).

2. Mindful of the past few months' events, half (52%) of the public say that they are somewhat or much more likely to use an on-line government service than to go to an office or facility.

3. Most Americans are willing to sacrifice some of their on-line privacy if it helps in the fight against terrorism: 57% of both Americans and Internet users agree that Internet users should be willing to give up some privacy to help track terrorists.

4. The public feels more positive toward e-government and its increasingly important role in how the government interacts with citizens. Americans see benefits of e-government beyond its contribution to homeland security and they are increasingly positive about the government's overall use of Internet and other information technologies. Today two in five (42%) adults say that they feel positive toward e-government compared with 35% who felt positive a year ago.

5. They are more optimistic about e-government's effects on government operations, as 61% expect e-government to have a very or somewhat positive effect on the way that government operates compared with 56% who said so in August 2000. The public also puts a higher priority on government's investing tax dollars in making information and services available over the Internet, as the proportion saying that such investing should be a very high or a high priority has increased seven percentage points since 2000 (from 30% to 37%).

6. Although Internet use appears to have leveled off, e-government is growing as Internet use filters down from the federal level to state and local governments. Over the past year the proportion of Americans who have access to the Internet increased only slightly from 63% to 67% and Internet use has remained stable, as 77% of users now say that they use the Internet very or fairly regularly, compared with 75% in August 2000. Yet, in August 2000 only 28% of Americans said they had visited a state government Web site and only 23% had visited a local government Web site. Now 36% of Americans have visited a state government Web site and 28% have visited a local government Web site.

7. The public continues to be concerned about security. E-government is seen by many as vulnerable to intrusion and attack—64% of adults say that they are extremely concerned about hackers breaking into government computers. The level of concern about the security of e-government systems has changed little over the past year, as 66% said they were extremely concerned in 2000. Identity theft, in particular, is a big concern among Internet users: two-thirds (65%) say that they are extremely concerned about someone obtaining government-stored personal information and using it to steal their identity.

8.   The public continues to want a government that listens and is accountable to them. Making government more accountable was Americans' biggest hope for e-government last year (36% most important result of e-government) and it remains their biggest hope today (30%)—62% now say that e-government will make government more accountable, compared with 54% who said so a year ago.

9.   The public sees a range of e-government benefits. The public believes that each of the three types of government applications—government-to-citizen ("G-to-C"), government-to-government ("G-to-G"), and government-to-business ("G-to-B")—are important. A large majority (70%) of Americans say that it is very or fairly important that government invest tax dollars in methods of providing citizens with access to government information and services that are easier to use. Nearly as many (68%) say that it is important that government invest in ways to improve communication across government agencies and between federal, state, and local government. A smaller majority (62%) say that investing in e-government that helps businesses use government resources and meet regulations is an important use of their tax dollars.

10.   Government leaders recognize the benefits of e-government and are enthusiastic about the possibilities. Government leaders already are seeing the benefits of e-government. More than three in four (78%) government decision makers say that e-government has had a somewhat or very positive effect on the way that government operates.

11.   Seeing the benefits, senior government officials are putting a higher priority on e-government than they did a year ago and they are more likely to say that we should move quickly to develop e-government rather than slowly. Three in four (76%) officials think that investing tax dollars in making information and services available over the Internet should be a very high or high priority (69% in August 2000). The proportion of government officials saying that we should proceed quickly versus slowly in expanding e-government rose from 56% in 2000 to 62% today.

12.   The public draws the line at on-line voting. A large majority (63%) of the public rejects the idea of allowing people to vote on-line for federal offices such as the presidency or Congress. Not only do 51% strongly oppose on-line voting, but support for this proposal has dropped five percentage points over the past year, from 38% in August 2000 to 33% today.